Great Guns

ARCHAEOLOGISTS UNCOVER TRACES OF A PACIFIC ISLAND'S WARTIME PREPARATIONS.

By Joseph Kennedy

The Historic Preservation Officer in American Samoa put out a call for bids from archaeologists to survey the uplands above Pago Pago harbor on the island of Tutuila. Some might have thought he was suffering from a tropical fever when he made that request. Most of the history of that island is buried in deposits close to the shore; what else could be up in those mountains besides wild pigs and lots of jungle? But the official, David J. Herdrich, knew there was a great body of data there that has been mostly buried for

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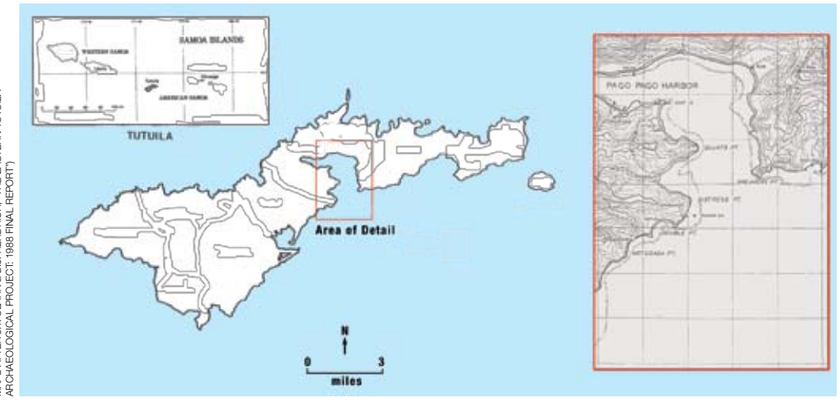
COURTESY DAVID J. HERDRICH, AMERICAN SAMOA HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE

Above: View across Pago Pago harbor, American Samoa, toward Blunts Point (highlighted area): For defense during World War II, two naval guns were placed on the ridge above the point, and two more guns were similarly placed on the opposite side of the harbor entrance. Left: The "upper" Blunts Point gun after recent cleaning and repainting. The barrel is twenty-five feet long and has a six-inch bore.

Archaeologists found the upper Blunts Point gun forgotten and rusting; the second gun, lower down the ridge, is a National Historic Landmark.



AMERICAN SAMOA HISTORICAL PRESERVATION OFFICE (LOCATOR MAPS AFTER J.T. CLARK & D.J. HERDRICH, "THE EASTERN TUTUILA ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT: 1986 FINAL REPORT")

Pago Pago Harbor (Area of Detail, above) as mapped by the Intelligence Section, 2nd Marine Brigade, Reinforced: The uplands above Blunts Point and Breakers Point were chosen as sites to each receive two naval guns.

more than seventy years. I knew it too, and was pleased when my bid was accepted. Subsequently, in three different sessions, my crew scoured the grounds, identifying, measuring, charting, and photographing the residues of what, during World War II, had been a major defensive installation.

The history of those residues began in May of 1938, when Japanese military actions in the Pacific prompted Congress to direct the Secretary of the Navy to conduct an assessment of the strategic importance and state of readiness of United States naval bases in the Pacific. In 1939, the War Plans Section of the U.S. Marine Corps prepared a specific report on the defenses of American Samoa, with a focus on U.S. Naval Station Tutuila—a place that had been under shaky American jurisdiction since 1900.

It was not just about the tiny former coaling station the Navy maintained there; the greater reason for evaluation was that Samoa was a key strategic link between the U.S. and its allies in Australia and New Zealand. As difficult at as it may be to understand this today, war planners back then realized that if Samoa were to fall (and the Japanese were certainly planning on invading), communication and supply lines to New Zealand and Australia would be severed, and that would have delivered a huge blow to Allied forces in the Pacific. It did not take a great military mind to realize that additional men and equipment were going to be necessary in Samoa, for at that time, as the report, issued in December 1939, enumerated, the islands were defended by one naval officer and fifty-two enlisted men—including four Samoans—serving on the USS *Ontario* (a coal-burning, seagoing tug built for the Navy in 1912), plus seventeen land officers, seventy-two enlisted men, one Marine, and seventy-six members of the Fita Fita (a guard made up of native Samoans recruited into the U.S. Navy).

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Munitions bunker at Blunts Point

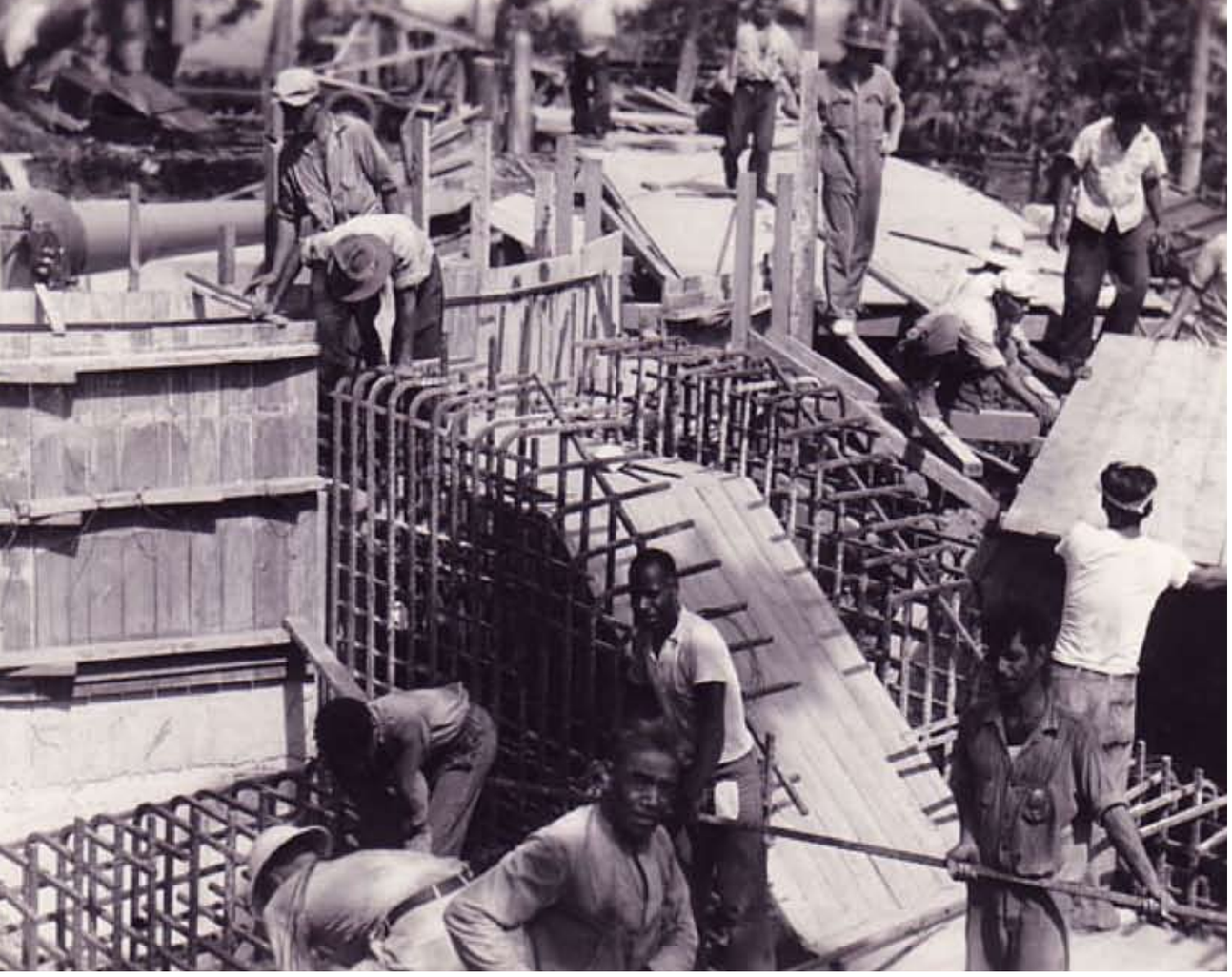
In the meantime, on September 1, 1939, Hitler's army had crossed into Poland, and the war in Europe was officially off to a dramatic and bloody start. Because of Germany's alliance with Japan, and in light of Japanese actions in Manchuria and China, it was clear that plans for a greater American presence in the Pacific were going to be necessary. The task of beefing up the Pacific military's role primarily fell to the U.S. Marine Corps. On March 22, 1940, the Naval Governor in American Samoa received a communication from Washington informing him that a Marine captain named A. R. Pefley was on his way to the islands to study conditions, make recommendations, and prepare a defense plan. He arrived two months later, and by July his report resulted in directives that would have a profound effect on island life.

Pefley launched an ambitious program that included an expansion of quarters for officers and enlisted men, the expansion and addition of storage and supply facilities, the improvement of roads, the construction of new roads, a new dispensary and new generators, more construction

Stairs and foundation remains are among many residues of the United States Marine installations built around the guns.

COURTESY DAVID J. HERDRICH, AMERICAN SAMOA HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE

A rusted pulley played a part in hauling construction materials, weaponry, and supplies uphill.



Construction of one of the gun emplacements at Breakers Point

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equipment, and improved sanitation facilities. All of this was to be implemented by five large American construction firms.

Over the next fifteen months more than 320 inches of rain would saturate the island, turning it into a muddy nightmare for the natives and especially for the civilian workers and their motorized vehicles. One worker estimated that Tutuila got "about half the rainfall for the whole world." When it wasn't raining, and things dried out a bit (it never really dries out completely in Samoa), the construction activities kicked up so much dust that it gave the work crews and natives alike a catarrhal cold known as "cat fever," and this in turn made the everyday high heat and oppressive humidity even more difficult to bear. More bad news on the weather front arrived in the form of a hurricane that, among other inconveniences, sent 1 million board feet of lumber up into the trees and scattered out amid the dense jungle. Every single piece was recovered by Samoans, who scurried up the trees or disappeared into the bush to retrieve it all.

Further complications were brought into play by the hardheaded dictate that all building designs had to conform to U.S. Naval standards. Because the contractors were unable to adjust the specifications for the various structures to accommodate the locality in which they were built, the roof on the new bakery, for example, had to be designed to handle a twelve- to fourteen-foot snow load in a place where nothing heavier than a few breadfruit leaves might gather. While these changes were underway, the Chief of Naval Operations in Washington sensed that war might arrive in Samoa before the island was prepared for it. In partial response, he ordered that a Marine Defense Battalion be sent to Tutuila, and that it should arrive no later than January 15, 1941. The battalion was en route in December, but in the meantime the naval governor was authorized

SPRINGFIELD ARMORY MUSEUM ARCHIVES

to begin the construction of naval defense and antiaircraft positions.

This occasioned the arrival of tens of thousands pounds of concrete and many mid-range field guns and antiaircraft pieces. But most significantly, four huge naval cannons were unbolted from World War I dreadnought battleships and shipped to Pago Pago. These were 6-inch mount, 50-caliber Mark VI or Mark VIII cannons, meaning they had a bore diameter of 6 inches and a barrel length of 50 × 6 inches, or 300 inches (twenty-five feet). Each gun (barrel and breech mechanism, not counting the mount) weighed some 19,000 pounds; the individual shells weighed 105 pounds and each required a powder charge weighing 39 pounds. These cannons were to guard the entrance to Pago Pago harbor at places called Breakers Point to the east and Blunts Point to the west.

The Marines decided that to take best defensive advantage of this resource, the four guns, together with all the ammunition as well as the concrete, rebar, and wood that would be required to construct a supporting complex around the guns, should be hauled up into the mountains some 150 to 200 feet above sea level. The route to these positions was through heavy jungle and up 70-degree muddy slopes. There were no roads, or even decent trails, to the four gun positions. A crusty civilian worker who had just completed a number of difficult tasks on the island commented that "the real job would be the gun emplacements." By this time an advance party of the USMC 7th Defense Battalion had arrived, and after taking one look at the tasks involved with placement of the 6-inch guns, it was quickly decided they were going to need a lot of help.

After weeks of backbreaking work, with the Samoans doing most of the heavy lifting, it was determined that tramways needed to be constructed in order to send the guns and other materials up the hills, and the contractors

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Top photo: Members of the 1st Samoan Battalion, U.S. Marine Corps, at arms inspection: The battalion was formed in 1941, when World War II was underway but before the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Right: At a May 1, 1944, memorial for Secretary of the Navy William Franklin Knox, members of the Fita Fita Guard lead a procession, followed by Samoan Marines and other personnel. Made up of Samoans, the Fita Fita was a contingent of Naval Station landsmen organized as early as 1900.

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A skid, above, constructed for installation of an anti-aircraft artillery battery, warns, "Absolutely No Joyriding." Right: The cable tracks for hauling material up Blunts Point were especially steep. Bottom, opposite page: Excavation proceeds for the Blunts Point magazine, whose remains still stand, built into the hillside [see photograph on page 21].

immediately sent a request to Alameda, California, for steel rails, hoisting gear, and cables to get the job done. They were told that these items would be on the next boat, but this was apparently not fast enough for a poorly defended garrison that was anticipating a strike at any time. So the Samoans were called upon to cut pathways up the sides of the slopes, and flatcars were hammered together. The problem of rails and wheels for these flatcars was still a vexing obstacle until the natives introduced the contractors to a particularly strong local hardwood called *ifi lele*, and it was from this native species that the necessary component parts were fashioned.

What happened on December 7, 1941, and the three days afterwards was, for the people living and working in Samoa, worse news than even the most informed war watcher could have imagined. The report of the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor was received in Samoa at 1000 hours (10 A.M.) on December 7 by Staff Duty Officer W. J. Sperry USMC. The word spread rapidly, and by noon Tutuila was in a full panic of preparation. A call to arms went out across the island to all able-bodied men, but it proved to be unnecessary, because before the radio message had time to spread, the "Coconut Wireless" outdistanced the electronic message, and by noon hundreds of young Samoan men voluntarily came from all sections of the islands and gathered at the naval station, armed with their machetes.

The wives and children of the contract workers and navy personnel were evacuated from where they were staying on base and moved to remote places on the island; gas masks were issued to the contractors, sailors, and Marines; and rifles were handed out wholesale to virtually anyone who was strong enough to carry one. The highest priority, however, was the final placement of the four 6-inch cannons on Blunts and Breakers Points, for these were counted on as the primary defense against invasion.

The island's greatest fear was realized in the early hours of January 11, 1942. A Japanese submarine surfaced in the waters off the village of Fagasa on the island's north coast and then sent more than a dozen shells over the mountain and into the vicinity of the Tutuila Naval Station. The shooting war had come to Samoa. Fortunately for the Americans and Samoans, most of the shells overshot their marks and fell harmlessly into the harbor. Just two men were slightly injured: an American officer was knocked off his bicycle and a Fita Fita was wounded in the leg. However, an ironic footnote to this event must rank near the top of all those recorded in the history of World War II. Of all the fifteen or so shells that were lobbed over the mountain, there was only one direct hit, and that was squarely upon a building owned by of one of the few Japanese residents in American Samoa. The big guns at Blunts Point were unable to respond to shells that came over the mountains behind them.

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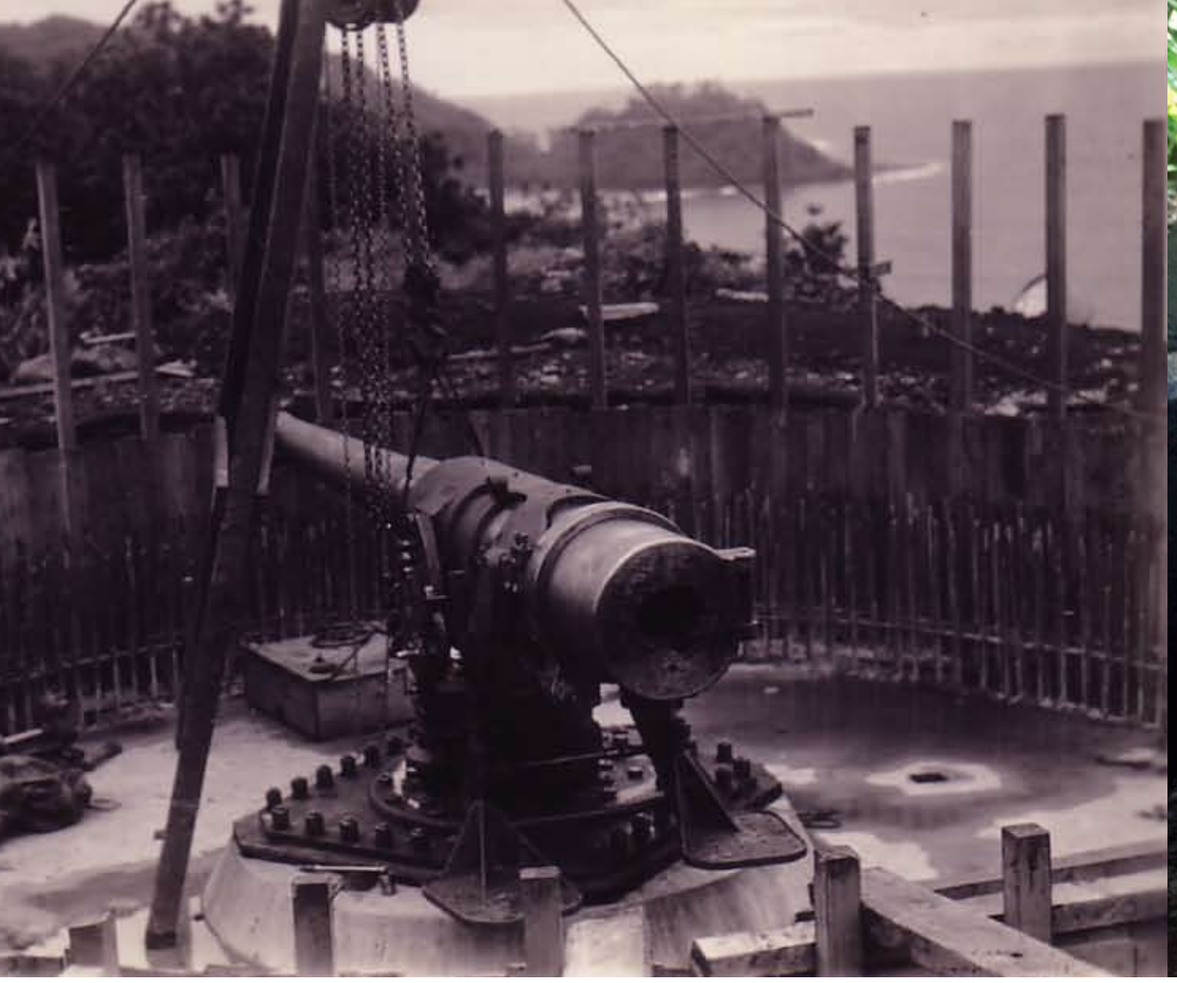
Over the next year and a half, tons of equipment and thousands of men poured onto the island, and at one time there were more Marines on Tutuila than there were Samoans. A local man who remembers that anxious time said, "There were so many Marines on the island you could hardly move." Perhaps the Americans did not know if the Japanese were coming or not, but as mentioned, the Japanese High Command certainly was planning on it. In July of 1942, their revised South Pacific operational orders called for the 17th Imperial Army to seize New Caledonia, Fiji, and Samoa, and the capture of Tutuila specifically was assigned to the 41st Infantry Regiment. Curiously, if this regiment of perhaps 1,000 Japanese soldiers ever had attacked Tutuila during this period, they would have been annihilated.

But things changed rapidly after the Battle of Midway, for that is when the Pacific War theater suddenly shifted north into Micronesia. From that point on Samoa essentially became a backwater. The Marines did train in Samoa and left from there for the pivotal battles of Tulagi, Gavutu-Tanambogo, and Guadalcanal, but over the next three years Samoa began to retreat into its sleepy place in the sun.

Seventy years and a lot of jungle later, most people have forgotten about those troubled days at the beginning of World War II and all the hard and frenzied work that took place above Pago Pago harbor. Most of the U.S. military materials were removed as part of what was called "Operation Rollup," but the still-fresh memory of what it took to haul those big guns into position was enough to defeat any idea of trying to bring them back down again a few years later.

One of the Blunts Points guns eventually found its way, in 1986, onto the National Register of Historic Places and is actually categorized as a National Historic Landmark. Most people on the island have heard of the big gun at Blunts Point, but few



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NATIONAL PARK OF AMERICAN SAMOA

Set on its mount, above, one of the Blunts Point guns overlooks the harbor entrance. Right: Samson Atoe, an employee of the National Park of American Samoa, stands at the breech of the rusted upper gun. He participated in a project with Samoana High School students to drain the gun emplacement and refurbish the gun [see photograph on page 18]. Inset, opposite page: The students and park staff who worked on the project pose by the lower gun.

actually visit it, even though it is one of the few remaining pieces of its kind left in the Pacific. In 2000 the Seabees arrived in Samoa and did some work around the Blunts Point cannons, but even they were not aware of the extent to which the Marines had dug in up there back in 1942.

Our survey focused on the Blunts Point site, an area of about fifty acres, much of which is on government land, as is the access road (and the private landowners do not mind people visiting their part of the site). A similar survey of the Breakers Point complex is planned for the future; the two guns were cleaned some years ago, but they are both on private land and are less accessible. At Blunts Point we recorded that the second gun, long forgotten and neglected in the jungle, is still extant. It has now been refurbished. Along with it we documented the remains of an entire compound, or what is left of it. Surrounding the twin guns is a network of concrete stairways and ammunition bunkers, and foundations that once held barracks, cookhouses, showers, and latrines.

It was essentially a Marine Corps village where anxious and hard-working men lived out their young lives and wondered about their fate. If you were to ask about the value of historic preservation, I would say that it gives life and a voice to a period in time that deserves to be remembered and appreciated, as a tribute to those who crafted a part of the past in a different and difficult time.

Marines and Samoans alike huddled around their radios up there in the evenings and listened to the popular music of Harry James, Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey, Woody Herman, and Duke Ellington. The Samoans quickly mastered the guitars that the Marines brought with them, and together they played and harmonized "You Are My Sunshine," "Margie," and other tunes of the day. World War II deejays such as Jean Ruth Hay, in her programs called "Reveille with Beverly" and later "GI Jive," soothed them with music from back home, and the so-called "Tokyo Rose" Iva Toguri (a UCLA graduate who broadcast under the name of "Orphan Ann") worried them with a steady diet of popular music interspersed with news of Japanese successes throughout the Pacific.

Up there in the mountains the Marines ate a stale World War I version of the C-Ration and today's MREs (Meals Ready to Eat) that had "1917" stenciled on the crates; it was called "canned Willy." Spam sandwiches were considered a treat. The Samoans wisely kept to their traditional diet of taro, bananas, and breadfruit. They did introduce the Americans to the expression *fai fai lemu*—"Take it easy."

The research described in this article was partially funded by the American Samoa Historic Preservation Office through a Historic Preservation Fund grant from the U.S. National Park Service, Department of the Interior. The contents and opinions do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the American Samoa Historic Preservation Office or the Department of the Interior.

Joseph Kennedy (1948–2012), born in Chicago, received a master's degree in anthropology from the University of Hawaii. Long based in Haleiwa on the Hawaiian island of Oahu, he was Principal Investigator for Archaeological Consultants of the Pacific. Among his many professional contributions was an archaeological survey of Oahu's Waimea Valley, which documented the importance of the valley to Hawaii's history and led authorities to take measures to preserve it from development. One of his most recent projects was a novel about the colorful nineteenth-century explorer Richard Francis Burton, now under consideration by publishers. His previous contributions to *Natural History* include "The Wild Man of Samoa" (February 2004) and, most recently, "The Sitting Man" (February 2011).